

My Linguistic Conundrum

I can't help but feel *blur* when I reminisce about my many scuffles with linguistics and the shortcomings that I had to deal with. When I enlisted in the army in Singapore, little did I know that my next two years would be spent trying to figure out a new vernacular which eventually would become my metaphoric language of home, mostly because of all the memories associated with it. It was a language that brought comrades together because it conveyed a certain sense of belonging and affiliation. Singlish has been around for as long the act of conscription has been in Singapore, which stretches something like five decades back. Of course not all of the Singlish vocabulary is organic to Singapore; a fair share of it also comes from popular culture and Hollywood movies. Naturally, it has absorbed a lot of military terminology too; one is sure to come across words like MIA (missing in action) & AWOL (absent without official leave) almost every day in bases.

It was my first month in boot camp and I struggled to grasp even the most basic slang, often making me look dumb in the platoon. Counter to my thought that talking in Standard English would sound more acceptable, it turned out that speaking in Singlish was the norm. It first hit me when our platoon drew rifles from the ammunition dump, and it was a standard operating procedure to check the rifle chamber, cock it once and clear it off. That day I missed out on one of those steps, and almost the next second I heard my commander scream, "Eh, don't act *blur*! How many times you done this already?" I startled immediately and looked around to try and make sense of what had happened. But my commander's twitching, infuriated red face was enough to tell me that I had made a mistake, a pretty big mistake. My commander essentially asked me to stop acting like a newbie because of the number of times I had done it

already. I found it really interesting how he conveyed so much anger and emotion in such few short words. After doing some research on what he said, I found out that “*blur*” in Singlish means clueless. This stems from how squids release ink in the water to create a blurry effect. Interestingly enough, squid is also a popular seafood in Singapore, so there might another story to link that to the Singlish vernacular. That is exactly why I’m still attracted to Singlish to this day, because every term has a story to tell. And more often than not it’s a funny story.

Singlish is a creole full of abbreviations and acronyms too. It took me a while to get well acquainted with the basic words. Some of the common acronyms that I thought I knew actually had a different meaning altogether in Singlish. Take for instance ‘NATO’; this for most people would mean the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. However, NATO too was not spared from the act of Singlish-izing common words; it has been reborn to become ‘No Action, Talk Only’ in Singlish. This ability to transform innocent words and give them a totally different meaning is what I miss about Singlish. Perhaps people are so caught up with their lives that they don’t find the time to pronounce entire words.

Just as impressive and interesting is the portmanteau of words in Singlish: the casual joining of two words to create a marvelous hybrid. What better way to convey your sense of agreement with someone in the most unique way possible? Enter *corrigh*, the clever portmanteau of the words: correct and right, but with an improved potency. This word is used to stress your agreement with someone, especially when the truth is glaringly obvious. I personally cannot think of any other word in Standard English that can convey that much emotion, all jam packed in one word.

I always found Singlish as a very interesting vernacular because it has the ability to shorten practically any sentence. It can convey so many emotions and expressions in the least

amount of words possible. This penchant for casually shortening sentences and words emanates from the fast paced, on-the-go lifestyle of Singaporeans, where getting the message across is considered more important than eloquence and all the fancy shebang associated with proper English. With the usage of words like *corrigh*t, if you add up the time, you could potentially save at least a few brief minutes in every conversation. Add few of those from days together, and *voila*, you probably saved yourself hours of communication. It is not a surprise that efficiency and productivity have a very high standing in Singapore's high-tech, gizmo, urban and globalized culture.

My attempts at speaking Singlish have been rather weak. More often than not I would become the laughing stock for mispronouncing a range of words. Since not all the words are derived from common English, a substantial proportion actually comes from other regional languages. The key to getting it right was saying it in the right context; and I have lost count of the number of times I took it out of context. However, I can hardly forget this story from the Army, during the time when our platoon trained out in the field on a scorching summer day. We were exhausted to the point that we could have just slept in the muddy filthy marshland where we trained, instead of walking a couple of miles back to the company line. Being the leader of my section, I got screamed at by my irate commander for failing to keep my group up to the expected speed in training. This was not the first time that I was yelled at by my ever-riled commander that day; I could tell he was sorely disappointed. It takes a certain knack to tell when someone, who's always angry, is really infuriated, and this was most definitely that time.

Irritated – like a bee had just stung him – he tilted his head just enough that you could see a scar – probably inflicted during his deployment in Afghanistan – on the side of his neck, followed by him incessantly growling “How many times today already! You trying to *arrow* me?” A wave of

chill rushed through my spine and I struggled to give him a complete answer. Instead I looked at my rifle wondering in curiosity as if it were an arrow of some sorts. Confused and dazed, I simply bowed my head gently down thinking it was probably best to not ask him what on earth he meant. Later, I learned that my commander meant to rhetorically ask if I was deliberately trying to annoy him, given the number of times I had disappointed him in one day. In Singlish, *arrow* is used to signify the feeling of being targeted or picked on for something you obviously didn't ask for. I patted myself on the back for making the call to bow my head down instead of talking to him further since that would have just enraged him even more. It is one of the many incidences that adorn the hall of embarrassment in my mind. However obscure *arrow* was to me, I had to admit that it was a pretty ingenious brainchild of Singlish. Who would have thought a medieval weapon could turn into an articulated weapon that could inflict possibly an equal if not more amount of pain through words?

I have a love hate relationship with Singlish. I like it because some words convey more meaning and emotions than words in Standard English, and also because it evokes some nostalgic memories from my time spent in the Army. Having said that, I also dislike some aspects of it because I feel it corrupts your ability to write in proper English if need be. Also, only about five and a half million people will actually understand you, a little more if you count Malaysia as well. So it's not something you should absolutely need to learn unless you plan to be in Singapore for the long run. In a world more globalized than ever, it is crucial to be able to speak standard English, more so the case in a global city like Singapore where outsiders are not going to get it when you *arrow* them, or agree with them in a *corrigh* way. Or so thought my parents, who treated Singlish the same way the Spanish inquisition denounced heresy. Maybe they are right; career wise it wouldn't be the best scenario letting Singlish flow into official

reports of multinational corporations, when working for them in the future. That would only make foreign employers *blur* about your place and prospects in their company. All this while I was discouraged from picking up Singlish by my parents because they feared I might get too well acquainted with it and lose my grasp of standard spoken English, since the grammatical structuring tends to be very haphazard and erratic compared to common English. But despite all that, I still saw some value in conversing in Singlish because it gave you a certain sense of acceptance with your peers in the army. Not speaking in Singlish made people think of me as a foreigner and often times I felt marginalized because of that. It is interesting how a language like Singlish has this innate ability of striking a chord with people of all sorts in the Army. It was something of a shared experience that brought your comrades together.

I would have to reluctantly admit that now being away from home and in a new country, the United States, for a significant period of time, I do miss hearing Singlish and being away from it strangely makes me feel like I am away from home. Although I was never able to completely master it – for better or for worse – I still do miss hearing it from time to time. Strangely, it evokes a certain sense of home if I do occasionally hear it now, after having left Singapore. It is weird because I never really considered it to be something I would want to associate myself with. I suppose I had to go ten thousand miles away to fully understand and appreciate the metaphor of home.

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